

In San Juan County, it appears history has been made with a majority American Indian commission and conservative firebrand Phil Lyman wins a House seat

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By Courtney Tanner

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It appears that there has been an historic shift to a majority American Indian county commission in San Juan County — one that vehemently opposes President Donald Trump’s executive order to shrink the Bears Ears National Monument. The seeming takeover by Navajo Democrats came amid the massive political upheaval in the southeastern corner of the state with court-ordered redistricting. The new boundaries were meant to realign political influence to the county’s majority Native American population and set up a historic special election.

In the one competitive commission race, the District 2 open seat, Democrat Willie Grayeyes held a 55 percent to 45 percent lead over GOP candidate Kelly Laws. If Grayeyes wins, the commission would feature two American Indians, the other being newly elected Kenneth Maryboy in District 3.



“That’s our real hope,” said James Adakai, chairman of the San Juan County Democratic Party, noting that repairs on tribal land have previously been ignored, “that our voices will be heard.” Conservative firebrand Phil Lyman, a San Juan County commissioner with a criminal conviction that reinforces his reputation as a rural, anti-federal government hero, handily won his bid Tuesday to become a state lawmaker. His victory was largely expected, after his decision to leave his post as commissioner to run for an open legislative seat. Current Commissioner Bruce Adams, a Republican, ran unopposed in District 1 and said he has “absolutely no clue” what to expect from the new boundaries and who might be joining him in the county’s leadership.

Grayeyes said late Tuesday — before noting he was going to bed early and would check on the results in the morning — that even if he won, there would still be hurdles in fighting persistent racial tensions in the region.

“The challenges we face every day will no doubt continue,” he said. “The opposition has also been displayed here and there throughout the county ... But changes are already taking place — and it’s starting with the redistricting.”

Grayeyes was booted from the ballot early in the race by county officials who said he wasn’t qualified to run because they couldn’t find his home on the Utah portion of the Navajo reservation. He challenged the decision in court and a judge reinstated his candidacy.

The special election has been marked by months of similar tensions leading up to Election Day, including accusations that the clerk’s office has purposely ignored the redistricting and that hundreds of residents have received incorrect ballots. The issues prompted the Department of Justice, the ACLU of Utah and the state elections office to send their own staff to the county to observe.

“Everyone was able to vote,” said Rachel Appel, who watched the Montezuma Creek polling station for the ACLU. “I don’t think anyone got turned away.”

A federal judge ordered in December that the county conduct a special election under redrawn boundaries that give Navajos, who tend to affiliate as Democrats, a significant majority of voters in two of three commission districts and three of five school board seats. The decision was meant to reverse the historic political domination by whites there where the population is slightly more than half American Indian.

Lyman, who convicted in 2015 of a misdemeanor for leading an ATV ride onto public lands in Recapture Canyon that were closed to protect ancient American Indian dwellings, could not be reached for comment Tuesday. Preliminary results showed him with a little under 70 percent of the vote — about 40 points ahead of Marsha Holland, an unaffiliated hopeful and historian from Tropic.